

1.941
R7305

January 1946

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Bureau of Agricultural Economics

SOME POSTWAR RURAL TRENDS IN KENTUCKY, NORTH CAROLINA,
TENNESSEE, VIRGINIA, AND WEST VIRGINIA

By Roy L. Roberts
Social Science Analyst 1/

Life in the rural areas of the Appalachian Region (Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) has been affected markedly by the war, especially by the shifting to new work within and without the region. Some of these changes are of passing significance only; others undoubtedly will continue to have effect for some time. People of some sections of the region have scattered throughout the United States to work in war jobs; in other sections the jobs have come to the people. Those who entered the armed forces sooner or later went to all parts of the world.

The number of returning veterans has increased rapidly as the months pass, but few of them show much interest in farming or any other job as yet. Readjustment to community life is slow and tedious.

According to all reports, farmers generally in this region came out of the war period with more money than they ever had before. Some groups of course have benefited more than others. Spending to meet the increased living expenses and then improving their financial condition received first priority. For the future, they want more modern conveniences for the farms and homes.

The Bureau of Agricultural Economics has been observing these wartime adjustments for several months in 10 counties 2/ in the Appalachian Region. Information was obtained by interviews with county and local leaders, agencies, and farmers, during the latter part of 1945.

Occupational Shifts and Population Migration

Farm people left agriculture in the Appalachian Region in large numbers between 1940-46. Some were drafted into the armed forces and involuntarily left gaps in the labor force, to be filled by others.

1/ Linden S. Dodson and James Stephen Brown, Appalachian Region, BAE, did the field work in some of the sample counties and contributed to the report.

2/ The counties are: Graves, Magoffin, and Scott Counties in Kentucky; Columbus, Harnett, and Haywood Counties in North Carolina; Humphreys and Wilson Counties in Tennessee; Pittsylvania, Virginia; Greenbrier, West Virginia.

Many left the rural areas voluntarily to work in war industries. Some of the poorer agricultural sections which had unemployed, or at least underemployed, workers before the war, did not experience what was thought of as labor shortage until after workers had left for war industries. Hardships resulted in many individual cases but, by and large, this shift was made without too much difficulty.

In counties where new jobs were within commuting distance the folks stayed on the farm and went back and forth daily. Many wives and daughters worked off the farms with a minimum of disruption to farm production. If a war job would pay more than his farming, the operator frequently reduced his farming to a minimum, and took the war job. This happened most frequently among the small operator-owners, tenants, and sharecroppers. Larger operators, with satisfactory incomes, usually stayed on the farms. Farmers with fair-sized tobacco acreages usually decided to stay on the farm. Those operating general farms or cotton farms usually did not find the returns so satisfactory, and were more likely to leave the farms than the tobacco farmers. Where possible, farmers shifted to the more profitable crops to increase their incomes and they swapped labor to get their work done.

People living east of the Appalachians usually sought employment on the Atlantic seaboard; those west of the mountains sought jobs in areas represented by Nashville, Akron, Detroit, etc. Migration was usually north and east, not south. By and large, similar situations were noted among both the colored and the whites. The Negroes who were better situated were inclined to stay in the area rather than try their fortunes elsewhere.

Despite the reduction in the agricultural labor force, farmers have done a good job and have met their production goals. The wartime experience, however, has raised two occupational questions concerning farming in this area. (1) The use of mechanical and power equipment has particularly aroused the farmer's curiosity and interest; should he buy this equipment now that it is available? (2) Perhaps there are too many people trying to make a living from agriculture here; are other industries needed to supplement farming?

Farmers who were up against the problem of getting their work done readily saw the advantage of more mechanical equipment. Tractors became much more common in the Appalachian Region, and the cotton picker moved "closer home." Some of the farms were too small to support a tractor, but the possibility of hiring someone to do the plowing and preparing the seedbed had its appeal, particularly when money was readily available.

The term "labor shortage" continually cropped up here, during the war. There were not so many workers as there had been before the war. Wages were higher and farmers had difficulty adjusting to the new conditions. Longing for the old situation was frequently expressed by the phrase "labor shortage." Yet as the farmers began to see that they could get the work done with fewer people and that the income could be

divided among fewer people, they began to wonder whether as many people would be needed on the farm as have been needed in the past.

The farmers and their families want the higher income, but they are not sure they know how to assure its continuance. Some think the answer will be found in additional industries. Locally the solution seems beyond their control. This belief is one of the powerful reasons why few plans are made locally to meet postwar problems and adjustments.

Both men and women are now returning to the Appalachian States. In some counties as many as half of the veterans are back. Reconversion shut-downs in industry have caused many war workers, especially those with families, to return. Single persons apparently have tried to "stick it out", to be on hand when the factories reopened. Whether the veterans and returned war workers will stay in their home counties seems to depend to a great extent upon the amount of employment in urban areas.

Veterans Adjustments

Veterans from the Appalachian Region have been among the first to return to their home counties from the war. The number has increased rapidly within the last few months. Only a few have shown immediate interest in farming. This may be due to the fact that this is the slack season for farming. Older men with established farms and sons of the larger and more prosperous farmers seem to adjust to the farms more rapidly but, by and large, the veterans want to rest and take a look around before they settle down to a job or to active participation in community life. The farms or the small towns frequently seem "dead", with "nothing going on" to boys who have grown accustomed to group activities.

Giving advice to the returning "boys" seemed within the reach of the communities, and all counties made some provision for supplying information to veterans. The Agricultural Extension Service usually established a lay advisory committee in each county for veterans. The Farm Security Administration has a veterans' advisor in some counties. In some instances, local committees to assist veterans consist of representatives of the various agricultural governmental agencies. The Red Cross volunteered its services, the established veterans' organizations evidenced renewed interest and enthusiasm. In several counties the most effective work was being done by the American Legion when this study was made. Seldom did any other local organizations volunteer their services.

Many of the committees within these five States were appointed before veterans began to return in any number. With little or nothing to do, these volunteer committees lost interest. The committeemen who continued their efforts soon became aware of the complexities and implications of the GI bill and other veterans' problems, and shifted their responsibilities to full-time specialists. The bulk of the counseling and assistance is now given by full-time members of the staffs of

agencies such as the United States Employment Service, War Manpower Commission, Veterans Administration or State veterans' commissions, the Agricultural Extension Service, Farm Security Administration, and the public schools. There is confusion, in many places, because the services are not coordinated. Veterans located near cities that have agencies with qualified, full-time workers are receiving the most complete and extensive service. The majority of the veterans in this area do not think of the Selective Service Boards as places to get assistance on their return to civilian life, even though these boards have been officially designated as information centers.

Of the first veterans to return home, those seeking employment have had little difficulty getting jobs, even though no community efforts were made to provide jobs in rural areas. The prospect of getting a "satisfactory" job or "one with a future" seems less likely as the number of returning workers increases. The readjustment allowance provided under the GI bill has given the veterans more time in which to find a satisfactory job. The self-employed farmer-veteran, owner or tenant, may qualify, but sharecroppers, in some counties at least, are disqualified for readjustment allowances. This has been unsatisfactory both to the veteran and to his landlord. To get loans under the GI bill seems too complicated a matter to many; very few loans have been reported in any of these counties.

Part of the difficulties and irritations experienced by the veterans in connection with the GI bill arise out of their lack of knowledge of the bill and part out of the speed with which the men were demobilized. Many of the provisions of the bill need considerable study, which the GI's are not willing to give at the separation center; nor does the center have the time to instruct the veterans in the various aspects of the bill, even if the veterans were willing to give time and energy to the matter.

After these veterans get their discharge papers, obtain ration books where necessary, visit their old friends, and make their initial adjustments, they begin to discover that many of the things they want are the same as those wanted by civilians--good jobs and good farms. Better houses and more modern conveniences are wanted in the rural areas by both groups. The merging of these two groups into one community, however, is still an accomplishment for the future. But an awareness of their common problems is becoming more widespread in rural areas.

Farmers' Use of Increased Income and Savings

Farmers in the Appalachian Region have had larger incomes during the war than before, but of course all farmers have not shared equally in this increased income. The increases have been used to maintain or raise the level of living; to pay debts; to buy some new equipment, usually machinery; and some has been set aside as savings, either as bank deposits or in war bonds.

Tobacco farmers have been the most prosperous of those in this region during the war. The farmers with large acreages have had the greatest increase in income, but all tobacco farmers have had more than previously. Landlords have received the greater share of this increase.

The general farmer with several crops has had some increase in income, the amount depending on the size of his operations. For the smaller farmers the increase in the cost of living has practically eliminated the possibility of setting aside much as savings. A large proportion of the small general farmers, especially in the poorer areas, got jobs in the war industries to supplement their incomes from farming. Soldier allotments have been an important factor in the increase in income; in some of the poorer agricultural counties they were the most important source of income.

For most cotton farmers in the Appalachian Region the cost of production was almost as great as the price received for their crops. In some counties the small farmers and sharecroppers could make practically as much picking the other man's crop for cash wages as they could growing and selling their own.

Rationing has limited the items that farmers could buy, but within these limits all groups have spent more than formerly for food, clothing, recreation, and other living expenses. In some of the tobacco areas, particularly among the smaller farmers, there was noticeable new building and repair work on the farmhouses and barns.

Debts and mortgages have been paid rather generally, and the usual feeling is that the farmers of the region now are in a good financial condition. Money has been accumulated to finance their own farming by many people who were unaccustomed to this freedom.

Bank deposits, usually from the larger farmers, have mounted rapidly. Farms have been bought. Many Farm Security borrowers are repaying their loans ahead of schedule. The number of tractors has increased markedly in the last few years, as has tractor equipment.

Farm families in the Appalachian Region want more modern conveniences. The demand for electricity and electrical equipment and the sign-up for electric power is high in all areas. The desire for refrigerators and washing machines appeared in most of the conversations in connection with this study. Talk of buying a tractor is widespread; the greater use of mechanical equipment definitely seems a part of future plans and operations. Automobiles and trucks will be bought, but there is not so much discussion of these items as of tractors. Farms have been and probably will be bought, in some instances as a backlog against a future depression and in others as a home.

In summary, during the last few months in 1945 farmers in the Appalachian Region have seen many of their friends and neighbors return from the armed forces and a few return from industrial jobs. How many veterans and war workers will return home and how many will stay in

and it would be necessary that the local town or county property

their home county is unknown. The feeling is quite widespread that the number and kind of jobs to be found in industrial areas may decide the question. Farmers have liked the increased income of recent years and the improvements it has brought in their conditions. They hope to obtain more modern conveniences, but since they are not sure of what the future will bring, they are proceeding cautiously.